

Building Trust and Respect

1/1/2012
Sandra Conrad

Sunday January 01, 2012

by: Sandra Conrad

When working to improve students' lives, school counselors find teaming with other student services personnel can make a dramatic difference. Whether addressing students' career goals, academic issues or personal/social issues, it's easy to see how other faculty members and student services personnel can lend a helping hand.

"It often does take a team to address the various issues of student's needs and concerns," said Alan W. Burkard, Ph.D., Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wis., and ASCA president. "It requires collaboration to make sure students' needs are being met."

"It works best if we work together," said Steve Schneider, NBCT, school counselor, Sheboygan South High School, Sheboygan, Wis., and ASCA secondary level vice president. Schneider knows first-hand what a collaborative environment can mean for a school. "We work hand-in-hand on almost everything. There's a culture here. If you're going to work in our building, you have to come ready to play together."

A collaborative environment doesn't automatically happen, however. A solid foundation of trust and respect has to be in place first. According to the "Enhancing the Principal-School Counselor Relationship Toolkit," developed by ASCA, the College Board and the National Association of Secondary Principals (NASSP), "Trust and respect are fundamental components of an effective working relationship. Few people can work well with someone they do not respect or with someone they do not believe respects them."

"I wish I had a magic formula for how trust and respect happens," Schneider said. "A lot of it has to do with a healthy understanding and respect for what each other does."

"Communication is vitally, vitally important to trust and respect," said Tammi Mackeben, interim coordinator of guidance and counseling, Socorro Independent School District, El Paso, Texas, and 2008 ASCA School Counselor of the Year.

School counselors wishing to work more collaboratively can start by nurturing an atmosphere of trust and respect with their colleagues, including appreciating them as both individuals and professionals.

Respect: Find Out What It Means to Others

Mackeben learned a lot about building trust and respect when she worked with ASCA, the College Board and NASSP on the Finding a Way project, which focused on school counselor/principal relationships. "It was interesting that both school counselors and principals came up with trust as the most important thing in any relationship and respect as number two."

What surprised Mackeben even more was realizing the variety of ways people defined "respect."

"Everyone sees respect as something different," Mackeben said. This was especially true with her school principal, Ricardo Damian. "I saw respect as respect for me as a person; whereas for him as an administrator, it was respect for his position," Mackeben said. "He said to me, 'Respect to me means you respect my vision of the school.' When I understood that respect to him was respecting his vision, I knew how to approach him on everything."

Mackeben encourages school counselors to find that kind of clarity and rapport with colleagues. "It's so important to build a relationship with a person and ask them, 'What does respect mean to you?'"

When describing his definition of trust and respect, Damian told Mackeben, "When you say you're going to do something and you follow through with it, first of all, that's when I begin to trust you. Once I trust you, I can respect you. But I can't respect you until I trust you."

"I started thinking about that," Mackeben said, "and I realized that's really the same for me. I can't really respect someone unless I trust them. Trust comes first."

Mackeben suggests getting to know people as individuals as an important first step in building trust. “You start building that trust when you start building that relationship with them.” That means finding out about their likes, dislikes, strengths and weaknesses. It also means including them in school counseling activities. “I think the best way to build trust with other people is to invite them to the table,” Mackeben said. “When you’re having activities and functions, when you’re going in doing your classroom lessons, invite other people like the school nurse or the school psychologist. Ask for their expertise on topics they can help with. Ask for resources.”

In building trust, Mackeben also stresses the importance of doing what you say you’re going to do. “If you set new goals, follow through with them, and make sure you accomplish those goals. Then people will begin to trust that you’re a vital person on that campus.”

“I don’t think it’s any different building trust on a campus as a school counselor than it is building trust with anyone, with your family, with your kids, with anyone. You build it by being consistent and following through on things,” Mackeben said.

Speak the Principal’s Language

When starting to build trust and respect, school counselors should look no further than the principal’s office. “The person you have to start with is the principal,” Burkard said. “If you can begin to align yourself with the leadership of the school, I think that garners you some power within the school in a positive way. You gain some credibility, you gain some respect, you gain some expertise and perhaps you’re allowed to use your expertise in ways that will benefit the school district.”

A proactive approach is particularly important when building trust and respect with busy school principals, Mackeben said. “They don’t have the time to go to you because they’ve got so much on their plate. Go in and make an appointment with your principal and talk to them about what their goals are.”

“I can’t imagine a building administrator who would not be willing to engage in conversation about big issues,” Schneider said. “They’ll want to be involved, which is what you want.”

Burkard also stresses the importance of understanding the language of school principals. “I think it’s really incumbent upon school counselors to understand that frame of reference,” Burkard said. Asking questions such as “How is the principal looking at the school world? What pressure is the principal under? What concerns does the principal have? What are the principal’s ultimate goals?” helps school counselors better align their goals with the principal’s goals.

For many school counselors, aligning with the principal’s goals means brushing up on the school mission. “Any school counselor who doesn’t know the school mission or doesn’t know the school improvement goals isn’t in line with the school principal,” Burkard said.

At a recent state conference, Burkard asked a group of more than 300 school counselors whether they knew their school mission and school improvement goals. “Not even a quarter of the room raised their hands,” he said. “So there’s some work we have to do in that area.”

Burkard also encourages school counselors to figure out how to mold their programs to better fit with the school’s overall goals. “I think that’s really essential, because that’s what the principal’s interested in.”

Communicate, Educate, Advocate

Another important aspect in building trust and respect is to educate people, including the principal and other administrators, on your role as a school counselor. “I think it’s really difficult for people to trust you if they don’t understand what your role is and what you’re supposed to be doing,” Mackeben said. “Once you start educating people, they begin to trust you because then they understand why you’re doing what you’re doing.”

“Principals don’t really receive a lot of training about what school counselors do,” Burkard said. “A lot of what they know is based on what they have seen in their own school systems, the quality of the school counselor they’re working with and the advocacy that person does.”

Educating others is an ongoing process. “I don’t think it ever stops,” Mackeben said. “Every year it’s an ongoing process to explain more and more about what the role of the school counselor is.”

Although advocating for the profession is essential, it’s equally important for school counselors to find out about others’ roles. “You’ve got to go to them to build that relationship,” Mackeben said. “You need to go find other people on your campus and find out what they do as well. What is the principal’s role? What is the nurse’s role? What is the

psychologist's role?"

"If we're the role models by asking what's important to them, they will reciprocate and ask what's important to us," Mackeben said. "It's happened every time with me. We all want somebody to ask what's important to us."

Mackeben is sensitive to the possibility that people aren't always comfortable with that higher level of sharing at the beginning and may view it as if the school counselor is questioning what they're doing. "It's not that we're questioning, it's that we're trying to find out if we can be more of a team for the best interests of the students," Mackeben said. "Once they understand why you're trying to learn about their role, they're very open to sharing because everybody wants to share what they do."

"I think it is important that school counselors reach out and understand other roles and talk about those roles," Burkard said. "It does take some good collaboration to figure out how they're going to work together. So, having good communication among those groups is essential."

Play to Each Other's Strengths

Talking about roles can help teams figure out who's going to do what when responsibilities seem to overlap. "People often don't take the time to talk about what they expect of each other in those situations," Burkard said.

"There's room for multiple roles and still working toward a common goal," Schneider said. He points to his school's suicide prevention coalition as an example of that collaborative spirit and trusting each other's expertise. "There were so many things that needed to get done, no one group was going to say, 'This is our turf.' We were all working together on a common project. That really seemed to help with the issue of understanding each other's roles and gaining respect for each other as professionals. I think the sense of collaboration just perpetuated from that point."

Schneider suggests picking a large education issue that requires collaboration, such as response to intervention or positive behavioral intervention to improve collaboration. "It has to be a big goal that the pupil services team can work toward together," Schneider said. "That does two things. One, it puts pupil services in a leadership role in how a building or district's going to reach a certain goal, and two, it forces you to have conversations with each other."

Mackeben agrees, saying that after working together on a big project, collaboration across departments comes naturally.

"I would find it incredibly frustrating to work in a place that didn't have collaboration," Schneider said. "A lot of this stuff is really hard to do on your own."

Sandra Conrad is a freelance writer based in Dallas, Texas, who previously wrote for ASCA School Counselor on the School Counselor of the Year program.